

# Film and Video Autobiography Course

English 49-/590. Tues-Thurs 5-7 p.m., 214 Greyson  
Professor Julia Lesage, 357 PLC, x3979. Office hours: Wed. 1-4 p.m.  
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## COURSE GOALS:

This course will examine many autobiographical films to study how autobiography works in a visual medium. Not much has been written on this subject, so we will proceed from watching many examples to making our own theoretical conclusions. Because we will be watching independent media, work not available for rental, daily attendance is very important.

Autobiographical film, today most commonly made in video, is a form of expression that is usually has characteristics of both the lyrical poem and the personal essay. The maker uses images to lyrically capture the past or a state of consciousness in an emotional way; the soundtrack often establishes an interpretation of the past or of the person's complex identity. Three of the main themes that autobiography often takes up will be covered in this course: family, love and sex, and overcoming trauma or adversity. Interestingly, the mediators who want to develop these themes are often women, gay, or immigrants or people of color, and often a complex combination of these; it seems that film autobiography, unlike literary biography, is most often taken up by someone who feels they have an unusual, oppressed or *contested* life.

Some of the specific questions that we will look at and decide for ourselves are the following: What role does a person have to play in the making of the film for it to be an autobiography, since people speaking in the first person are a common feature of both television and documentary film? What makes a good or compelling autobiography? What about marginal forms of first person story telling, such as tabloid talk shows? How can home movies be used for autobiography? How can media represent such intangibles such as mental processes?

In the course of our discussion, the students will use an internet discussion board, short papers, student led discussions, and a term project to set out and illustrate the dimensions of what film autobiography can, and possibly should, be.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

**ABSENCES:** Students who are absent for the film can make it up in the IMC. Students who are absent for the film screening should then hand in a one page response to the film, after they have seen it in the IMC. This make-up work can be submitted no more than a week after the absence.

Students should phone or email me in advance if they know they have to be absent. More than two days absences without a serious excuse will affect a student's grade.

**WRITTEN FORM:** All written work turned in must be correct in terms of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

**SPECIAL NEEDS:** Any students who have special needs should see me outside of class to discuss them. No one can take this class and say they have to leave early or come late due to another overlapping class or due to work schedules. If you know you will have this problem, drop the course now.

Any time that a question or problem arises with the course material you can send me a memo by email and I will respond as soon as possible.

**COURSE MATERIALS:** There are no books or course packet for the course. Our work will consist mainly of film viewing, structured class

discussion, weekly questions for consideration posted on the web site, and research students do on an individual basis for their term projects. Students should also read the STUDENT MANUAL FOR BLACKBOARD online at <http://blackboard.uoregon.edu/>

**WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:**

Week 1, 9/26--Topic: Course introduction; the family as a subject for autobiography. Short films and discussion: MOVING TO THE SUBURBS. ON CANNIBALISM. Discussion Board Assignment, found at Discussion Board site. This should be completed by the following Sunday and will include questions on the film to be seen on Thursday.

9/28--Topic: Men and their families and role models. Film: THE POET AND THE CON (an artist resumes contact with an older uncle who was a hit-man) ---Teacher-led discussion.

Week 2, 10/3--Topic: Family mysteries. Film: THE DEVIL NEVER SLEEPS (a filmmaker returns to her extended family in Mexico to make a film about her uncle's unsolved murder)---First student-led discussion of the film.

10/5--Topic: Nostalgia--Film: BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS (comic feature by noted playwright Neil Simon about his childhood in New York)

Week 3, 10/10--Topic: Happy vs. sad childhood---(2) Student-led discussion on BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS. See THE WASH and analyze it. ---Teacher-led discussion.

10/12--Topic: The family and national politics. Film: WHO'S GOING TO PAY FOR THESE DONUTS, ANYWAY? (a Japanese-American filmmaker establishes contact with a father who was in the Internment and then was living homeless, and also films his more prosperous brother)

Week 4--10/17-- Topic: Family ties in other countries. Film: DON'T FENCE ME IN (an Indian filmmaker makes a film about her mother, who scripted this work. Whose autobiography is it, hers or her mothers?)

10/19--Topic: Lyrical construction of a portrait of the extended family--Film: OBSESSIVE BECOMING (a panoramic view of one's family's past in a poetic way).

Week 5--10/24--Topic: A man's view of love relations. Film: SHERMAN'S MARCH (a man depicts his troubles in love and how he provokes it)

10/26--Topic: Men--happy and unhappy in love. Finish seeing SHERMAN'S MARCH. See short film, "1970" (a lyrical look at love, marriage, and first child).

Week 6--10/31--Topic: Gender issues, ethnicity, and international politics. Film: BRINCANDO EL CHARCO (an autobiographical fiction in which a Puerto Rican lesbian explores issues of gender, language, and imperialism. Contains a sex scene.)

11/2--Topic: Death of a loved one--Film: SILVERLAKE LIFE (two filmmakers document the death of one of them from AIDS)

Week 7--11/7--Topic: Sad and happy love. Student-led discussion of SILVERLAKE LIFE. Film: THE LOVE TAPES (a booth is set up where people can talk for five minutes about love).

11/19--Topic: What kind of self-presentation is it?--Selections from tabloid talk shows dealing with love and sex.

Week 8--11/14--Topic: Living with the trauma of mental illness. Film: DIALOGUES WITH MADWOMEN (filmmaker traces the lives of women who had been institutionalized with mental illness, including herself)

11/16--Topic: Recuperating from trauma. Film: RAPE STORIES (using talking to the camera to recover from rape)

Week 9--11/21--Topic: Illness and society. Film: DELIRIUM (filmmaker and her depressive mother look at women's mental illness)

Week 10--11/28--Topic: Telling one's story for sake of human rights. Film: CALLING THE GHOSTS (two Yugoslav women tell their stories about rape and ethnic cleansing for the U.N. Human Rights Commission)

11/30--Topic: Irony and wit. Films: WOMB WITH A VIEW. PATAGONIA. BUCKAROO BOY.

Exam Week--Final project to be handed in by 4 p.m. in my office.

WRITING THE SHORT PAPERS:

You will write a five page comparison of how two films exploring family, or, in the second paper, two films exploring love and sex/gender accomplish what they do. The issue is not so much to explore differences in content, but differences in approaches, attitude, style of images and narration (the sound track). Also, provide your evaluation of what each film accomplishes--its strengths and weaknesses. Choose two films that somehow make a good comparison: Some bases for comparison might be men's vs. women's perspectives; small budget vs. large budget; lyrical vs. essayistic; socially vs. personally oriented; fictional recreation vs. documentary style; short vs. long.

#### THE TERM PROJECT:

This will be an 8-10 page paper. Alternatively, it can also be an artistic and creative presentation. This might be a video, edited and no more than 15 min., or an artistically presented set of images with commentary, or a written autobiography. These have to be self-consciously structured, and accompanied by a brief statement of what you hope this kind of presentation can accomplish.

The paper might take up the following questions or topics:

1. See other autobiographical films which I can put on reserve in the Media Center or which you have access to, and compare these to ones seen in class. If they are films other than the ones I put on reserve, check with me so we can make sure it is an autobiography.
2. Take up a topic like gender, race, or illness and trauma, and read some books about it, perhaps using readings from other courses, and analyze some of the films we see in class or others, according to those social issues. If they are films other than the ones I put on reserve, check with me so we can make sure it is an autobiography.
3. Look at web sites that show you someone's apartment all day long, like Jennicam, and decide whether those qualify as autobiography. Find other kinds of autobiography which you think qualify as that on the web.
4. Analyze talk shows in greater detail.
5. Compare and contrast literary autobiography with film autobiography, comparing a book and a film and telling how they accomplish different things. Check with me to verify the appropriateness of the texts you want to compare.
6. Pick some philosophical concept like history, memory, consciousness, childhood, etc. and tell how a literary and filmic autobiography may have different resources to develop these. Compare a book and a film. Check with me to verify the appropriateness of the texts you want to compare.
7. Develop a topic of your own, in consultation with me.

**TEAM PRESENTATIONS ON THE FILMS:** One team of 3-4 people presents the class discussion on most of the films. The students from a specific team will present the discussion immediately after the film showing in class, or the next class period if the film is a long one. They will each speak and give a specific presentation or ask questions to stimulate discussion.

In the classroom presentation, key issues or questions should be raised for class discussion. An individual response to the film should be prepared by one or more of the team members and read to the class as a discussion starter. This may help in later writing the short paper, as some of that written work can also be used there. Also, one or two team member can offer an analysis of film style. I will also be available, especially by email or in office hours to help team members prepare their collective and individual presentations. We can show a clip in class to discuss it collectively. We will all work together so that the teams make the best possible presentation.

The team grade for the presentation will be based on how effective the team is in getting the class to consider the main aesthetic tactics and issues around film autobiography that the film raises.

#### DISCUSSION BOARD PROCEDURE

Requirements:

Each week, noted in the Assignments sheet, you are required to make a Discussion Board posting. Here is how it goes: I will post one or two discussion Threads and questions, related to the week's films seen in class. The Team making a presentation about the film we saw and other related films will also post several Threads that you can reply to. You will post at least one "substantive" Reply of at least three paragraphs to one of those Threads. Or you can start a new and thoughtful Thread of your own for others to reply to. And you will also post a short reply to someone else's observations about a film.

You will be graded on your long Reply in terms of its quality, and on your short response to someone else just for doing it. This work must be posted in the week in which it was assigned, before the next Monday that we have class. Late postings will receive less credit, depending on how late they are posted.

See subsection below on Grading Postings for how I estimate the quality of the long postings and decide what is "substantial" and what is "trivial." You may comment as often as you like to other students or me in Discussion Board. But you must make at least one "substantial" posting and one short comment for the weeks in which Discussion Board is an assignment. I will decide what I think is your most substantial postings and give you a letter grade on that.

In general, it is important not to write too long, but to offer more information than a mere opinion. Five or six sentences makes a good length paragraph. Think of writing something that reflects your best judgment and then enjoy what others say, too. In this

kind of computer discussion about film, readers want to read what the others wrote and then get in on the action themselves.

### *"Netiquette" Email Etiquette* (by Cindy Veldhuis)

Because email-speak is a language all unto itself, it's important to know what you are communicating when you do certain things:

- **ALL CAPS:** When you use all upper case letters, it's the equivalent of yelling in e-speak, and people may think YOU ARE ANGRY when you just hit the caps lock key by mistake. Use it discriminately!
- **Smiley faces:** A lot of times you may say something and know you are making a joke, but because others cannot see you, they cannot tell if you are serious or joking. So, if you make a joke, or mean something in jest or sarcastically, it's a good idea to consider using cues:

:) or :-) smile

;:) or ;-;) wink

:( or :-( frown, sad, etc

grin

very big grin

But be aware, these corny signals may add some social cues, but are still pretty limited!

- **Acronyms that are used a lot:**

IMO in my opinion

IMHO in my humble opinion

BTW by the way

OTOH on the other hand

- **Quoting:** When you respond to someone else's email, it's really nice if you can cut out the parts of the previous email that are irrelevant, and just leave the ones that directly refer to what you are saying. This makes it much easier to read, and takes less bandwidth (memory). For example, not so good snipping:

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Suzy said:

>I think the world is blue and oysters are yucky, and  
>then the other day I was talking to my professor and  
>he said he thinks that the world is red, and oysters  
>are great. And I said, "well, that shows how little  
>you know because in fact it said in the newspaper that  
>the world is blue, and so it is. And also, I think  
>psychology rocks".

I agree! :)

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Good snipping:

Suzy said:

>I think psychology rocks.

I agree!

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In the first example, we have no idea what part of the message the responder is referring to, plus we have to read that original email again, which is not so very useful.

•Flaming: There's this thing in the internet called flaming. Above I said that since this is not face to face communication, it's hard to tell if the person is joking or angry or sarcastic, etc. This is especially noticeable in "flame wars". Sometimes you may think someone is being rude, or they upset you, and so then you sit down and type out a furious response and send it off, and then they reply even more upset and then you get more upset, and it just takes on a life of its own, and people get really angry. This is very common and very avoidable. Here are some ideas for avoiding or de-escalating this:

1. Be polite, be kind and open, don't assume that how you read the message is how the other intended it.
2. If you feel attacked, hurt, angry, leave the email for a bit. Have someone else read it and tell you what they think. Try to read it openly and see if there is any way to interpret it differently. Definitely do not respond right away, and when you do respond, have someone else read your response to tell you if it might make things worse, or be misconstrued.

3. Remember that this is a limited medium, and this stuff happens, and that often it's just miscommunication.
4. Ask the other person what they meant. Instead of saying, "Oh yeah, well you eat moldy twinkies!", ask "When I read this, I thought you meant that all people who eat black licorice are weird. Is this what you meant, or am I misinterpreting it?"
5. Sometimes it's best to not deal with it in email, if things start feeling heated, it might be best to talk in person
6. When in doubt, consult a TA or the professor.